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INTERRELATEDNESS IN HAMSUN'S *MYSTERIER*[1]

RONALD G. POPPERWELL
Cambridge University

IT has not been easy for critics to show great confidence in dealing with *Mysterier*. Many have assumed that there is a residual area of inexplicability in the work, which its very title suggests.

This is no doubt so, but I suggest that attention has been directed somewhat too exclusively to the chief personage in the book, Johan Nilsen Nagel, and that something more is to be learnt by looking a little more closely at the other characters, at the nature of the society they constitute, and at the relevance of *Mysterier* to Knut Hamsun's other work.

I wish, therefore, to begin by considering the society of the small Norwegian coastal town in which Johan Nilsen Nagel "pops up" on a June day in 1891. The little town with its doctor, lawyer, schoolmaster, etc., is, on the face of it, not unlike the small town which is the setting of some of Ibsen's plays and of many Norwegian novels and short-stories of the realist period, the period of which Hamsun was very critical. Yet when we come to examine this small-town society in *Mysterier* more closely, we see that its literary *raison d'être* is not to present a realistic picture in the traditional sense: to exhibit relationships within a society on the basis of role, interest or ideal, from which conflicts and affiliations emerge, and which pose moral, social, or philosophical problems. Rather, society is presented almost as a biological organism, implicitly atavistic in character, and made up of interrelated and interdependent organisms, of which some are strong and aggressive and others weak and submissive. Together they form a cohesive whole in which the normal concerns of the realistic novel play little part. Let me give some examples of this.

In the second chapter of *Mysterier*, a character nicknamed Minutten (his real name is Johannes Grøgaard) is subjected to some hair-raising bullying in the café of the local hotel by a lawyer named Reinert.

[1] Paper given at the eightieth annual meeting of the Modern Language Association of America.

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Minutten is a man in his forties, of degenerate appearance, disabled (possibly also sexually) after an accident at sea.[2] He is the son of the former church minister of the town; now he earns a living by delivering coal. In the little town he is regarded as a decent fellow. Reinert's bullying takes the form of threatening to cut off Minutten's beard—it is a thin beard—forcing him to grind his teeth (Minutten had apparently done this before for a few pennies), putting cigar ash and matches into Minutten's beer and shouting at him to drink up, and poking his finger through a hole in Minutten's coat. When Nagel, who is sitting in the café at the time, intervenes on Minutten's behalf, both Minutten and Reinert are taken aback. The point is that in depicting this incident Hamsun was not concerned with showing a sadistic lawyer attacking a humble cripple, but rather to indicate a subtle relatedness between the bully and his victim. Nagel senses this and he asks Minutten: ". . . i hvilket Forhold staar De til den Fuldmægtig, eftersom han kan behandle Dem paa den Maade?"[3] Minutten says that there is no relationship between them, but he admits that everyone seems to know that they can bully him.

We get another example of this sort of relatedness in the two female characters, Dagny Kielland and Martha Gude. Dagny Kielland is in her twenties, the daughter of the present church minister of the town. She is a lively young lady, everybody's favorite, and she invariably carries a red parasol. She is engaged to a naval officer who is away at sea. Martha Gude, by contrast, is a prematurely gray spinster in her forties. She lives a retiring life in poor circumstances in a cottage near the harbor, supporting herself by selling eggs on the market square; she is usually clad in a green dress. During the course of the book Nagel proposes marriage to Martha and an Arcadian life together in the forests. Dagny intervenes and dissuades Martha—actually Nagel's proposal to Martha is an aspect of a love-battle between himself and Dagny. The point I wish to bring out here is the nature of

[2] Cf. Oliver in *Konerne ved Vandposten.* Jan Marstrander in his *Knut Hamsun* (1959) asserts that Minutten's hidden crime against Martha Gude was rape. If this is so, then it seems highly probable that it belonged to the pre-history of the novel: Martha Gude's father was a ship's captain and she had been to sea with him for many years.

[3] *Mysterier* (Copenhagen, 1892), p. 27.

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Dagny's and Martha's relationship. This is revealed in the last chapter of the book, after Nagel has disappeared. Dagny and Martha are on the way home together after a party; they both seem to be going to the manse. Dagny insists on talking about Nagel, which is clearly unwelcome to Martha; one senses a subterranean power struggle. The nature of this struggle emerges, I think, from the last words of the book. "Det er glat, [Martha says] vil du ikke tage min Arm? 'Jo, (Dagny replies) men tag du heller min.' Og de gik tause videre, Arm i Arm, tæt trykte op til hinanden."[4] And, finally, in this particular context of relatedness we can note that Karlsen, the divinity student who has been found dead just before the novel begins, had apparently cut both his wrists with Dagny Kielland's penknife.

The nature of human interrelatedness (as Hamsun sees it) is also brought out in other ways in *Mysterier*. It can hardly be unintentional on Hamsun's part that both Minutten and Dagny are the children of church ministers. The implication of this is, I believe, that although Minutten and Dagny are completely different, they are nevertheless to be regarded as part of the same interdependent human organism, of which, in their cases, the cross-reference is (so to speak) a clerical collar. Similarly, the fact that we have three characters in *Mysterier* with the surnames of well-known Norwegians (Dagny *Kielland,* Martha *Gude*, Johannes *Grøgaard*)[5] is scarcely without significance, especially in the light of the discussions on 'great men' which we get in *Mysterier*. In these discussions Nagel dismisses with contempt the men currently regarded as great. They are, he says, merely middle-men who purvey ideas acceptable to the masses; they are apotheoses of the aspirations of the masses. The fact that Hamsun uses the names of Kielland, Gude, and Grøgaard is, I believe, an oblique reference to these discussions and an implication that also the so-called "great" are part of one interdependent organism, that they may be regarded as "great" at one stage and insignificant at another. Finally, in this particular context of interrelatedness it is noteworthy that the little town has

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 516.

[5] Hans Jacob Grøgaard (1764–1836) was a well-known Norwegian clergyman who was incumbent of the parish of Vestre Moland from 1811 to 1822. He represented Kristians Amt at the meeting of notables at Eidsvold in 1814. See *Norsk biografisk leksikon* (Oslo, 1931), V, pp. 19–21.

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its *Iglekone* who, presumably, is at hand to dispense leeches as required.

In its corporate aspect, Nagel on occasion experiences the little town very much in terms of menace, as a creature capable of swallowing him whole. One evening when he is looking down on it from a height he notes: "Byen saa ud fra Højden . . . som et underligt, grenet Kæmpeinsekt, et Fabeldyr, der havde kastet sig flad paa Bugen og strakt Arme og Horn og Føletraade ud i alle Retninger; kun hist og her rørte det et Led eller trak en Klo til sig . . ."[6] And, similarly, the little town seems to be implied when, towards the end of the book, Nagel has a fevered dream in which he is being pursued by ". . . et Skældyr med slunken Mave, som slæbte efter Jorden og drog en vaad Vej, en gruelig Hieroglyf med Arme ud fra Hovedet og en gul Klo paa Næsen."[7] The defensive aspect of the little town is also brought out: it organizes a so-called Defense Bazaar, and the narrator (insofar as he expresses opinions) is part of the defenses of the little town, wary of intrusions from without, for whom Nagel is "en mærkelig og ejendommelig Charlatan."[8]

It is not difficult to see in the small-town society of *Mysterier* a precursor of the "anthill" societies of *Segelfoss By, Konerne ved Vandposten,* and the Polden of the "August" books. In fact, in a sense, the little town in *Mysterier* is a sort of Polden, and Nagel a sort of August. The question is: what relevance has this view of the nature of society for the novel as a whole, and for the chief character, Johan Nilsen Nagel, in particular? Again we can proceed by reference to Ibsen. Nagel is an outsider both geographically and ideologically. He is from north Norway—a *kvæn,* and in a sense he has a mission in the little town. It is not difficult to see that he parallels in certain respects those Ibsen outsiders from up North: Dr. Stockman, Gregers Werle, Rebekka West, and the Strange Seaman in *Fruen fra Havet,* also a *kvæn.* It is also not difficult to see that the organism which is the little town in *Mysterier* has a parallel in the "compact majority" of *En Folkefiende* and the other compacts with which the Ibsen idealist has to contend.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 155.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 513.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 1.

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But, as we have seen earlier, the parallel between the small-town milieu in *Mysterier* and the small-town in Ibsen is merely one of external appearance, and does not extend to its character and concerns, so Nagel merely parallels the Ibsen idealist in appearance but not in actual fact. Unlike the Ibsen idealist, Nagel does not operate under the banner of All or Nothing, the Claim of the Ideal, or the Ennoblement of Mankind; nor does he ask anyone to "die beautifully" or "choose in freedom and under responsibility." His ultimate aims are unstated, but since he reveals himself as a pocket Nietzschean, we may assume they envisage "a revaluation of all values." His immediate aims, however, are concerned with the acquisition of power, and the instrument of acquiring this power is what he calls "mit Blods subjektive Logik." Thus it is not through the agency of a moral imperative that he operates to achieve his ends and reveal the light, but through a relapse into sheer atavism—the subjective logic of the blood. It is easy to see that both the atavistic terms in which the organism of the little town is conceived and the method of Nagel's operations there are of one piece, and that they both stand in sharp contrast to Ibsen's practice. Hamsun probably intended this. Just as in *Sult* he had taken a typically realist theme, hunger, and had treated it so differently from the realists and the naturalists, so in *Mysterier* he was paralleling Ibsen, but in vastly different terms. The critique of Ibsen which is implied is obvious.

Apart from this congruence between Nagel's methods and the nature of the social organism of the little town, there is also a parallel between the things Nagel actually does and the things which happen in the little town. For example, there is a very clear parallel between Reinert's bullying of Minutten and Nagel's own brainwashing treatment of him. Both Reinert and Nagel wish to have power over Minutten; the difference between them lies in the levels on which their bullyings are conducted. Just as Reinert, as one of Minutten's bullies, seemed to know that Minutten was fair game for him, so does Nagel know intuitively that Minutten is a person to whom he should direct his attention. But while Reinert's bullying is crudely physical, Nagel's is intellectualized and mind-directed.

We see that although Nagel operates on the basis of what he calls the subjective logic of his blood, he has to intellectualize and objectify

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it, and that he becomes involved in the same struggle for power as lesser organisms. Nagel's watchword is: "Menneske, dit Navn er Æsel," and his methods include gimmicks like his yellow suit and velvet cap, which has become his uniform and without which he is lost.[9] He talks of the Great Terrorist and says that Ola Nordistuen (conceived as the typical Norwegian peasant) merely exists to fertilize the earth—"han er den Soldat, som Napoleon rider over med skoet Hest."[10] He tries to achieve his ends by employing bribery, downright deception, double-talk, the double or treble think, and suggestive and symbolic storytelling.

It is this very intellectualizing and objectifying of intuitive processes which leads to Nagel's downfall. Just as mind-directed love becomes a mess in *Pan*, so, similarly, does mind-directed intuition become a mess in *Mysterier*. We see how Nagel progressively loses control of the situation when his schemings fail to operate in the way he had intended, and it is noteworthy that final disaster ensues when he loses his principal symbol or objectification of the intuitive: his iron finger-ring.

It is, of course, true that Nagel sailed into the novel with a ballast of depressing past experience, judging by the bottle of poison, a lifesaving medal with the name erased, and a violin case full of dirty linen which he brings with him. His indecision about going ashore on arrival seems to suggest an existential dilemma. Like the wanderer in *Under Høststjernen* who is irresistibly drawn back to the town, so is he; he feels a "sælsom Sympati," he says, at the sight of the little town, but it is clear that he has tried it all before. The lifesaving medal with his name erased suggests (as we later get to know) that he has experienced that there are some who prefer death to life; the bottle of poison he carries shows that he is prepared for that way out himself. The violin case symbolizes disillusionment, disillusionment with the esthetic experience as a way of making sense of life; we learn how

[9] It is noteworthy that during the violent fluctuations in Nagel's behavior towards the end of the book, which lead on to the final disaster, he goes out without his cap. "Først da han igen satte sig til Vinduet, opdaged han, at han havde gjort denne sidste Tur gennem Byen uden Hue paa Hovedet. Ja, han var gal, han var gal!" (1st ed. p. 417)

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

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he had, unwittingly, yet prophetically, spit on the report of his first concert as a violinist. Yet he nevertheless tries all these things again. His campaigns in the little town presuppose a belief in the possibility of saving life from the form in which it is lived there—in this he receives some posthumous justification in the enlightenment he has shed on Minutten's real character. He also continues to seek the esthetic experience as a way of making sense of life, and of this the symbol is silver—a silver hook, a silver forest, a silver arrow, the silvered pinnacle of the church: *Mysterier* is littered with the silver of the unifying esthetic experience, but it always evaporates. He even plays the violin again, but his performance ends with crashing discords. In the end it all fails. The fact is that Nagel, for all his intuition, is just as much a bound existence as the interdependent organisms of the little town. The same things continue to happen to him in his personal life too. He speaks of a girl from Kabelvåg who went off with a telegraphist; there is Kamma (the veiled lady who visits him briefly in the little town) who has deceived him; and in his relationship with Dagny Kielland he is again the third, injured side of the triangle. He complains that he is God's *idée fixe*, "en Tilværelsens Udlænding." It is not surprising that he carries the means of oblivion with him, and that he also seeks it in Nature, as in the well-known passage:

> Og man finder sig et Leje paa et vaadt Sted, lægger sig paa Maven paa den raa Myrbund og formelig fryder sig over at blive sørgelig gennemtrukken af Væde. Og man roder Hovedet ned i Rørgræs og svampede Blade, og Kryb og Mark og smaa bløde Øgler trækker sig opad éns Klæder og ind i éns Ansigt og ser paa én med grønne Silkeøjne, mens man til alle Sider omsuses af Skogens og Luftens urolige Stumhed, og mens Gud Herren sidder i det Høje og stirrer ned paa én som paa sin allerfikseste Idé.[11]

Life for Nagel becomes so unlike the ideal jump of which he speaks, "Tilspranget," into something new and creative which he says is the hallmark of the truly great man. Nagel's tragedy is that the only jump he can achieve is a jump into oblivion, a jump into the sea.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 443–444.

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